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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RABAT 000071

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG

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SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: BRINKSMANSHIP OVER CIVILIAN MARCH
TO THE BERM

Summary

¶1. (C) On January 16, a pro-Moroccan NGO announced plans to lead civilians on a march to Tifariti, the "capital" of the trans-berm buffer zone, on January 27. On January 23, the same NGO announced a postponement for logistical reasons. The Government of Morocco (GOM) has encouraged the march but, according to the UN, has not formally granted permission due to strong, though low profile, POLISARIO reaction. Should the march take place, it has the potential to incite violence and seriously harm the Western Sahara peace process. End summary.

A March to Reaffirm Sovereignty...

¶2. (U) The Association for a Moroccan Sahara (ASM), a nominally independent but somewhat murky pro-Morocco NGO plans to organize a march to Tifariti, a former town and current outpost in the desert southeast of the Western Sahara berm on January 27. ASM said that it was organizing the event to protest the POLISARIO's holding of its December Congress in the same town, which lies in disputed territory. ASM said it was marching to Tifariti to "re-affirm Moroccan sovereignty" and to ensure the free flow of people and materiel within "Moroccan territory." To reach Tifariti, the marchers would have had to cross the "berm" that divides the Moroccan-held zone from the POLISARIO side and possibly traverse minefields and pass armed opposing troops.

¶3. (U) ASM President Reda Taoujini told a press conference on January 16 that some 900 people would participate in the march from Smara, on the Moroccan side, to Tifariti. He said that the Moroccan military would provide logistical and medical support, assure security and "clear mines" in advance of the party. When asked about the proposed event, Minister of Communications Khalid Naciri said on January 17 that Morocco "guaranteed free speech and circulation" throughout its territory. He further added that the POLISARIO had violated Moroccan sovereignty by holding its conference in Tifariti. On January 23, ASM announced was postponing the march for "logistical reasons." It claimed that so many people wanted to join the march (over 2,000 including 50 domestic and international journalists) that they had pause to enhance their supply line. At the time the ASM criticized

another NGO, which planned to organize another march.

...Over a Desolate Town

¶4. (U) The GOM has made clear its intense displeasure over the high profile POLISARIO Congress in Tifariti in December 2007, as well as with the Congress's declaration that the POLISARIO would be establishing a greater presence in the buffer zone east of the berm. The Front subsequently declared it would be moving to actually develop the "Liberated Territories," which include Tifariti. The GOM holds that the territory is part of Morocco and no POLISARIO activity should be permitted.

¶5. (C) The object of this political brinksmanship is a desolate backwater. Before the 1991 cease-fire, the Moroccan air Force bombed Tifariti. The shell of a bombed-out building remains, surrounded by a small cluster of structures, including a hospital built with aid from several Spanish provincial governments. The hospital is empty, however, and there is no resident civilian population in Tifariti; just soldiers, POLISARIO officials, a MINURSO base and a few international deminers. With the exception of a some nomads based in refugee camps in Algeria, most of trans-berm buffer zone is equally sparsely inhabited. While the GOM has repeatedly raised its concern about buffer zone activities, its real worry is the consistent and sometimes aggressive POLISARIO threats to resume armed activity.

Political Maneuvering

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¶6. (C) The heat of the issue has been raised by the POLISARIO response to the threatened march. Various POLISARIO speakers have threatened to confront, detain or attack the marchers. One threatened a bloodbath if the march went ahead; another called it a *causus belli*. In communications with the Embassy (copied to desk) MINURSO mission head SRSG Julian Harston has expressed his concern about the march. Publicly he is hewing to the official UN position that MINURSO is in place only to observe and is only concerned with military activities. Privately, however, he indicated he would be urging the GOM to restrain the marchers from crossing the berm. So far, Moroccan military officials in the Sahara have told them they have not been officially informed, and no permission has been granted yet to cross the berm.

¶7. (C) In early January, 2007, ASM publicly announced a similar march, but canceled after the Embassy suggested that it might jeopardize the beginnings of what would become the Manhasset process. The ASM publicly cited the Embassy's intervention as the reason it called off the march. Like last year, we have conveyed concern to MFA officials, citing the potential disruption to the carefully launched UN-sponsored peace process and the Moroccan initiative. The Moroccan response has been "get the POLISARIO to stop making threats and stay out of our territory." Unlike last year, we have not contacted and do not intend to engage directly with ASM. MINURSO's position is that it is in place to observe the military cease fire and has no mandate to interfere in civilian activities such as the march.

Comment

¶8. (C) In theory, the ASM could meet POLISARIO civilian delegations in the buffer zone for track-two discussions, but the confrontational posture of both sides would appear to preclude that prospect. Taken together, POLISARIO threats to

"occupy" the buffer zone and to renew armed conflict could well be enough grounds for the GOM to want to make the POLISARIO uncomfortable. Unlike last year, the GOM validated the ASM's march threat with the statement that Moroccans have the right to go anywhere in the country. ASM has built upon this to demand protection from Moroccan security forces during the march. Despite its frequent criticism of the government and the CORCAS, many here suspect the ASM has ties to at least part of Morocco's security establishment.

19. (C) Comment continued: Despite the temptation to use the ASM as a proxy to "poke the other side in the eye," as one foreign diplomat put it, the risk levels are high. If the POLISARIO shoots at the marchers, the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces, even if they stay behind the berm, could feel forced to respond, escalating the conflict. It is possible that, with the postponement, the ASM has already been instructed to pull bank from the rhetorical brink. Such a delay preceded the cancellation of the march last year. We and others now have more time to observe and engage-and get through the next set of contacts, including Van Walsum's long delayed consultations in the region. End Comment.

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